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Race and Ethnicity

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Women and Gender Issues Specific to Them Where Welfare is Concerned

Keywords

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Abstract

Welfare seems to be more closely interwoven with the female gender. This is due in part to the wage gap between men and women, as well as dated yet rampant expectations of a woman's role within the family pertaining to welfare, should it ever be needed.

Key Points

- Two main instances of social welfare are food stamps and unemployment aid.
- The wage gap is a valid starting point for the discussion.
- Women are expected to be the ones to apply for aid.
- The inception of welfare was implemented by women.
- Men reap more unemployment benefits than women.
- Much needs to be done to even the scales, both at federal and domestic levels.

Issue Brief

The massive umbrella of social welfare encompasses assistance with paying for food, rent, medical expenses, etc. So if a very basic definition of welfare is attempted, it is not unfair to assume that it would include, at its most basic level, food stamps and unemployment.

It seems that the “face” of social welfare in America is that of a woman. To start with, households which depend solely upon the earnings of the woman, or joint households where the earnings of the man and woman are of equal importance, will suffer due to the wage gap between men and women. Though it has gotten better since 1980, it is estimated that right now, on average, women earn about 77% of what their male counterparts earn in a year, and usually for doing the same work. (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1

The Gender Wage Ratio and Real Earnings, 1980-2009, Full-Time Workers Year	Median Annual Earnings, Women, adjusted to 2009 dollars	Median Annual Earnings, Men, adjusted to 2009 dollars	Median Annual Earnings Ratio, Full-Year Workers	Median Weekly Earnings, Women, adjusted to 2009 dollars	Median Weekly Earnings, Men, adjusted to 2009 dollars	Median Weekly Earnings Ratio
1980	29,153	48,458	60.2	523	815	64.2
1981	28,324	47,816	59.2	517	802	64.4
1982	28,932	46,858	61.7	531	809	65.7
1983	29,973	47,131	63.6	543	816	66.5
1984	30,518	47,941	63.7	547	809	67.6
1985	31,152	48,241	64.6	552	811	68.1
1986	31,773	49,437	64.3	570	820	69.5
1987	31,937	49,000	65.2	572	820	69.8
1988	31,928	48,341	66.0	571	814	70.2
1989	32,473	47,286	68.7	567	810	70.1
1990	32,537	45,432	71.6	568	790	71.9
1991	32,374	46,343	69.9	577	777	74.2
1992	32,685	46,175	70.8	581	766	75.8
1993	32,287	45,145	71.5	583	757	77.1
1994	32,144	44,665	72.0	578	756	76.4
1995	31,670	44,338	71.4	572	757	75.5
1996	32,420	43,952	73.8	572	762	75
1997	33,381	45,011	74.2	576	774	74.4
1998	34,039	46,520	73.2	600	787	76.3
1999	33,888	46,862	72.3	609	796	76.5
2000	34,214	46,411	73.7	614	799	76.9

2001	35,391	46,366	76.3	620	812	76.4
2002	36,018	47,020	76.6	631	810	77.9
2003	35,823	47,417	75.5	644	810	79.4
2004	35,480	46,333	76.6	651	810	80.4
2005	34,996	45,463	77.0	643	793	81
2006	34,602	44,973	76.9	639	791	80.8
2007	36,320	46,678	77.8	635	793	80.2
2008	35,618	46,202	77.1	636	795	79.9
2009	36,278	47,127	77.0	657	819	80.2

Source: Annual data: 1955: Francine D. Blau and Marianne A. Ferber, *The Economics of Women, Men, and Work*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1992), Table 5.6 1960 through 2007; U.S. Census Bureau, *Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2009*, Table A-4. Weekly data: 1970 and 1975: Blau and Ferber (1992) *via* <http://www.iwpr.org/pdf/C350.pdf>

Women also tend to work fewer hours than men. This is logically the status quo for the same reasons as the wage gap. It has to do with employers simply choosing to give any extra hours to a man instead of a woman. However, another reason for this is because it is usually the woman who is expected to curtail her work schedule for the accommodation of childcare and, in general, all child-related issues (iwpr.org). It can also be assumed that because the woman of the household may be making less than the man, they are the ones whose work hours are more expendable. This again goes back to the wage gap and completes a vicious circle, one that fully relates to a matter of gender.

The first half of the aforementioned, bare-bones definition of welfare, help feeding the family, now comes into play. When funds are scarce, though inconvenient and difficult on some level, it's not impossible to give up luxuries in lieu of food. If at least one person in the household has a job, then it's likely everyone has medical insurance. If not, then there are places to go where insurance can be provided and adjusted on the basis of income, so these options address this other, very significant, portion of welfare: health insurance. However, there isn't enough money/cash funneling through the household, yet everyone must eat, and so *someone* has to go apply for food stamps.

And so it is when things get tight financially and help is needed to go to the grocery store, women are the ones most likely to be in line for the aid. This is probably why it was women who implemented the help in the first place (nyc.gov). It was the wives of wealthy men who first implemented public assistance (nyc.gov). Sadly though, even when both parents are present in a household where assistance is needed, it is rarely the males who lug themselves, or the children, over to the many available public assistance buildings and fill out the forms on behalf of the family (see Fig. 2).

Fig. 2

How many men can you count?



Source: <http://americanpowerblog.blogspot.com/2009/06/schwarzenegger-seeks-deep-cuts-in.html>

In these specific economic times, it's worth noting that the second half of our basic assessment of welfare, unemployment, is even more relevant than usual. If the wage gap is the result of discrimination, then it's fair enough to assume that when jobs are on the chopping block, women may be unfairly considered before men. Also relating to lower amount of money being earned by woman versus men, a woman's sheer eligibility to qualify for unemployment, should they be laid-off, is in jeopardy. The last time there was such employment unrest in the U.S. was in the late 70s and early 80s. Data shows that during these tough times, as ever, men reaped more monetary benefit than women. For instance, in 1982, only 3% of women nationwide as opposed to 22% of men qualified for the maximum amount of unemployment benefits (Abramovitz 299). Around the same time in New York state alone, though the 19% of women receiving the max was well above the national average, it still paled in comparison to the 53% awarded to men. On the flipside of that, 36% of women were receiving minimum benefits while only 13% of men received such limited unemployment aid (Abramovitz 299).

Where welfare is concerned, gender must certainly be considered. And it is on the side of women, where more questions are asked and answers are lacking.

Sources Consulted

Abramovitz, Mimi. 1996. "Regulating the Lives of Women: Social Welfare Policy from Colonial times to the Present" South End Press. Library of Congress.

<http://www.nyc.gov/html/hra/html/about/evolution.shtml>

Institute for Women's Policy Research. <http://www.iwpr.org/pdf/C350.pdf>

Relevant Websites

<http://www.womenforwomen.org>

<http://www.womensorganizations.org>

<http://www.nyc.gov/html/hra/html/home/home.shtml>

http://factfinder.census.gov/home/saff/main.html?_lang=en